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Congress Clamor Raised Anew Over Secret CIA

Argument Unsettled in Decade

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WASHINGTON

It "almost chills the marrow of a man to hear about" the clandestine activities of Central Intelligence Agency operatives, Sen. Richard Russell (D-Ga.) told the Senate in 1956.

Chilled marrow or not, many people feel Congress ought to hear a lot more about what the CIA and the rest of the government's vast intelligence apparatus are doing.

They feel Congress has done a dangerously inadequate job of auditing the agency that operates in "dark back alleys," as Secretary of State Dean Rusk once put it, all over the world.

It is an old argument that seems no closer to resolution today than it did a decade or more ago. But it

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has been revived in hearings before the House rules committee on bills sponsored by 20 congressmen to establish a joint Senate-House watchdog committee over the CIA.

CIA subcommittees have functioned in the House and Senate for years. But proponents of the joint committee idea say the present system is lax, cursory, and far too informal for overseeing such a vital part of the United States government.

Need For Secrecy

They do not question the need for secrecy, but they insist that a joint committee, staffed by full-time professionals and adhering to formal procedures, can do a much more effective job of supervision.

They point to the work of the joint committee on atomic energy, which rides herd on the Atomic Energy Commission and has not yet compromised any of its secrets.

But an agency that has jurisdiction over the back alleys—in the never-never land of spies, U-2 flights, and mysterious coup d'etats — is, of course, a different animal than the AEC.

There is a basic problem in dealing with the highly sensitive and vexatious issue of congressional supervision of the CIA.

The CIA is so secret, and the work done by the present CIA subcommittees is so secret, that it is extremely difficult for outsiders to make an informed judgment on how effective an auditing job Congress is now doing.

Alleged Blunders

These outsiders include the great majority in Congress. And that's the rub.

Many of these outsiders in Congress read of alleged CIA blunders in Laos and Vietnam and at the Bay of Pigs and wonder if Congress shouldn't be doing something more about the CIA. They don't really know all that the CIA did or is doing, and they wonder if they would know.

Some members of Congress are certain they should in order to fulfill their constitutional responsibility of overseeing the executive branch.

Last August, Rep. John V. Lindsay (R-N.Y.) told the House during a discussion of the CIA and other intelligence agencies:

"... We are often the victim of secrecy for secrecy's sake. Things are done to us and in our name which we know nothing of."

Sen. Eugene McCarthy (D-Minn.), who has been sponsoring joint committee bills for some 10 years, told the Senate last year:

"... as espionage and counterespionage have become more pervasive and their techniques more subtle, the need for secrecy has, if anything increased.

"Nevertheless, I do not think it right that the Congress, which has the constitutional responsibility to provide for the common defense and to oversee the operation of the executive agencies which operate in this area, should be kept so largely ignorant of what is going on in the 'back alleys.'"

And this year McCarthy wrote that the CIA "has taken on the character of an invisible government answering only to itself. The CIA must be made accountable for its activities, not only to the President but also to Congress through a responsible committee."

Saltonstall's View

The McCarthys and the Lindsays obviously do not share the view expressed by Sen. Leverett Saltonstall (R-Mass.) in 1960, after the U-2 was shot down over the Soviet Union.

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"We might obtain information which I personally would rather not have," Saltonstall said in warning the Senate not to investigate the CIA too intensely.

It is probably an oversimplification to suggest that the explanation for the opposing viewpoints lies in the fact that the Russells and Saltonstalls are "in" while the McCarthys and Lindsays are "out."

The CIA, a large bureaucracy which spends great sums and has extraordinary authority, answers to very few members of Congress. Its budget and number of employees are secret.

Russell and Saltonstall are in that select group because of their membership on the CIA subcommittee of the Senate armed services committee. Russell is chairman and Saltonstall the ranking Republican member.

They and an apparent majority on Capitol Hill feel the present system of auditing the CIA is satisfactory.

Once, in 1956, the joint committee issue was put to a test in the Senate. The Russells and Saltonstalls won, 59 to 27.

Voting with Russell was the then Democratic majority leader, Lyndon B. Johnson. The junior senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, voted for a joint committee.

'National Pastime'

When Mr. Kennedy switched not only from the "outs" to the "ins" but also took charge of the CIA as President, his views changed.

Last October, Mr. Kennedy discussed at a press conference the present congressional watchdog system. He also noted that the President receives the counsel of a civilian advisory committee comprised of persons with expertise in the intelligence field.

This group, the President's foreign intelligence advisory board, is an outgrowth of a Hoover commission recommendation in 1955.

"I am well satisfied with the present arrangement," Mr. Kennedy said.

Rep. Leslie Arends of Illinois, the ranking Republican on a House CIA subcommittee, and Sen. Thomas J. Dodd (D-Conn.), who has had some dealings with the CIA in the Senate internal security subcommittee, both took the floor this year to denounce what Dodd called the "popular national pastime" of "baiting the CIA."

The two staunch supporters of the CIA said the agency operates efficiently and always in accordance with presidential policy and under presidential control.

Some Rules Urged

As to the charge that the CIA operates without adequate congressional supervision, Dodd insisted that the CIA "is probably one of the most supervised agencies in the government." One wonders how he can be so certain.

Dodd pointed out that even if a joint committee is created, those congressmen who complain they do not know what the CIA is doing "would still find they know precious little about it."

He said the same rules of secrecy that now apply to the CIA subcommittees would apply to the joint committee.

Whether the joint committee could do a more effective job than the subcommittees, Dodd said, is a "purely mechanical question . . . of third-rate importance."

There is no question that the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 was incredibly mishandled. Assuming for the sake of argument that CIA personnel were largely responsible for the debacle, would a full briefing to a joint committee in advance of the invasion have made any difference in the outcome?

CIA's Answer

Would a change in form -- from the subcommittees to a standing joint committee -- significantly affect the substance?

The CIA's answer apparently is no. It has privately told the Senate foreign relations committee it believes the present system is satisfactory.

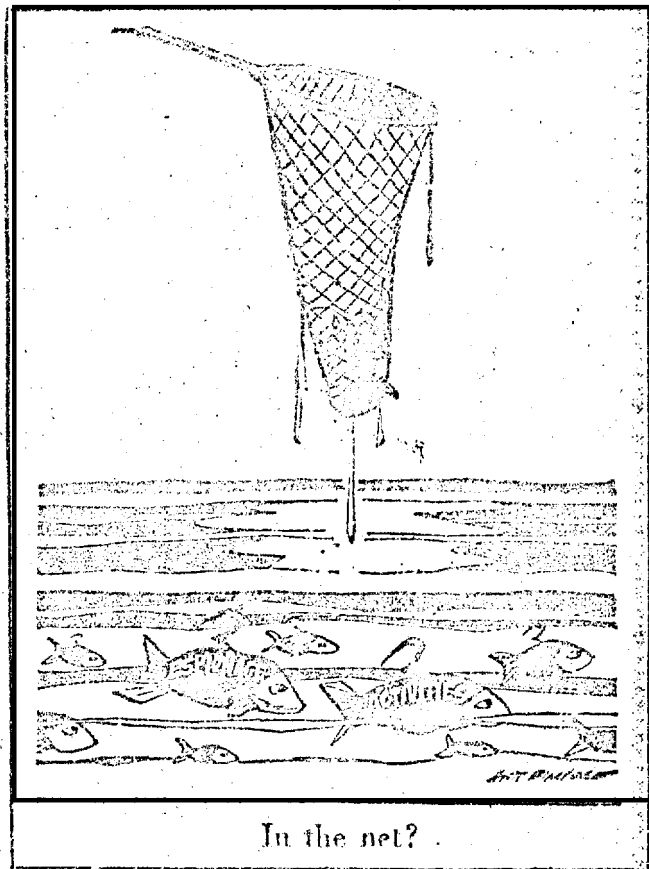
But it also says that the manner in which Congress organizes itself to assure adequate information on CIA activities is a matter for Congress to decide.

The House rules committee, as it has done in the past, is sure to pigeonhole the joint committee proposal.

But while a bill can be pigeonholed, an issue cannot. And the kinds of questions raised by the McCarthys and Lindsays cannot -- and should not -- be brushed aside lightly. Not in a Democratic society.

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